

May 28, 2023
Pentecost
Year A
Acts 2:1-21
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Seekers and Skeptics

The past two years of Confirmation were supposed to be our “back to normal years” years when we were able to put things back on the scheduled that we had had to skip because of the pandemic, things like lock-ins and pancake suppers and soup suppers and trips to Calumet. Years when we didn’t have to worry about being online or masks or having to figure out how to hold meaningful Confirmation classes outside.

But, somehow, these last couple of years have not felt as “back to normal” as I expected. I guess things took a turn last year, when I was sick with Covid for Confirmation Sunday itself and missed the whole thing, heartbroken and sick at home, when Hannah and Julianna were Confirmed. Not normal at all.

Then, knowing how small this year’s Confirmation class would be, with just two second year students, John and Adam, I prayed all summer and invited others to pray for more Confirmation students to join our class. I was thinking that God might send us some first-year students to join the class that some seventh graders might miraculously appear to fill out our classes. And my prayers were answered, though not in the way I expected. Instead of seventh graders, Maverick was the answer to my prayer, a junior in high school, who started his Confirmation journey back in 2019 and who had to

take the time during the upheaval of the pandemic off, has finished it this year. He was determined to finish this Confirmation journey and because of his determination he has had a unique Confirmation journey, with two different groups of classmates.

Adam, the athlete in the class, spent much of last year of Confirmation in a leg brace or on crutches, afflicted with sports injuries. He missed Confirmation Camp at Calumet last year because of it. He played Jailbreak on crutches because of it. This year, he managed to stay uninjured until just before the end of the year, but is being Confirmed in a cast. Adam, who is a student at a Catholic school, is the most theologically educated of any Confirmand that I have ever had, since he has theology class four days a week at his school and rounds out the week with Lutheran theology at Confirmation class for his fifth day of theological studies.

And John, well, John himself, being a part of the class made this year's Confirmation class anything but "back to normal." Every year I ask the Confirmands what their favorite part of their Confirmation experience was and the top answer that I receive, year after year, is Confirmation Camp at Calumet. The second most common answer is relational, the relationships developed with the other kids in the Confirmation class, the community that is created by those Wednesday evening classes, those lock-ins and trips, making pancakes together, creating a skit together, all of the prayer requests and all of the highs and lows shared.

John's answer was different. His favorite part of Confirmation class was and I'm quoting directly here, "Debating theology." Sometimes class got a little bit off track, because John had questions. Lots and lots of questions. Sometimes he was shocked when I even had some answers.

This year has been an adventure. But, of course, it's supposed to be, isn't it? Maybe at some point in history the Confirmation experience was about passively receiving information, but it's not that anymore. Confirmation continues to be about sharing information, the theology of the church, the stories of scripture, the ways that God has been seen to be at work in the world in the past. But Confirmation is also about how the kids, how the Confirmands find themselves in those stories, learn that God is there for them, and think about how they can engage in the life of the church and in the world as apostles of Jesus, who know that Jesus is one who loves and serves and saves.

Every year should be an adventure. This year did not disappoint.

And here we are on Confirmation Day, the Day of Pentecost. The day, that my children, with all of the irreverent embrace of the things of faith that pastor's kids tend to have, call it the day that the Holy Spirit licked the apostles. Way to take the holiness out of something, the sound of the rush of a violent wind, divided tongues of fire, resting on the head of each disciple. A divine licking indeed, that transformed the apostles from frightened, frozen followers, worn out from the up and down emotions of crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Jesus coming and going, popping up

where and how they least expected him, and promising them more as he left them once again. Before they knew it, they were speaking, in languages they themselves didn't even understand reminding themselves, reminding each other, telling strangers in their mother tongues, that God was present, active in the world, alive in Jesus Christ.

What's interesting to me, at least on this Pentecost day, is the reaction of the people who heard the apostles, who heard this cacophony of sound, and recognized their own languages in it. The reading from Acts for today tells us that all of them were bewildered, amazed, perplexed by this outpouring of sound, by this story of God's deeds of power. Many of them asked each other, "What does this mean?" But some of them were scornful. They decided that they knew what it meant. They decided that it meant that the apostles were drunk, that "they are filled with new wine." That the noises that they were making, that the story that they were telling couldn't possibly be true.

We see in our reading from Acts today a gathering of seekers and skeptics. People whose ears were open to that idea that God could be doing a new thing and people who had an answer for everything. I'm sure that those who sneered at the miracle of Pentecost thought that they were being very rational, very reasonable, when they turned their face away from what was unfolding before them, from the good news being offered them. I'm sure that they thought that the only truth in the world was what their cynical life experience had taught them. To them, it seems impossible to believe that these babbling men in the streets of Jerusalem, speaking so that everyone

would hear and understand were evidence that, behold, God was doing a new thing.

I'm pretty sure that they told me it was Adam's idea. I had the kids perform a readers' theater skit for me at Confirmation Camp on the giving of the Ten Commandments. And in the skit, every time the words, "The Lord" appeared, they were capitalized, which is the way that the written text of the English Bible represents the most ancient and holy Hebrew name for God. But Adam thought that the words should be read with extra emphasis. So, John, whose part had the words, "The Lord" in it more than anyone else's took Adam's advice. Every time those words showed up in the skit, and in the rest of Confirmation class and sometimes just because he felt like it, John gave them his all, emphatically reminding us that "The Lord" was with us.

And if they have gotten nothing else out of Confirmation class, I hope that they have gotten that, the trust, the hope, the faith that, as John declared, "The Lord" is with them.

As the Confirmation year draws to a close, we talk about the meaning of Confirmation, and I always make a point to say that one thing that Confirmation doesn't mean is that we have no more questions. It doesn't mean that we have all the answers. It doesn't mean that everything in our lives will always go smoothly like we have some kind of divine good luck charm in our back pockets.

Confirmation means simply that these young men, are open to the idea that miracles can happen, in their lives, in the world. It means that they are open to the idea that God could use them in the world, for good things, for hope, for peacemaking, for generosity, for service, for truth speaking, for justice making.

In response to the skeptics, in response to the scoffers, who said that that the Spirit licked apostles were drunk, Peter said, “Indeed these are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.” And then he went on to tell them what was really going on. In the outpouring of the Spirit, God was keeping a promise made through the prophet, Joel, to pour out God’s spirit on the people, so that:

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

Today, we celebrate the fulfillment of that prophesy in Maverick’s and Adam’s and John’s lives, that they have been given the Spirit, to prophesy, to see visions, to see wonder in a wonderful world, to have hope in the midst of a despairing world, to prophesy to goodness in a world of bad news.

And it is not just them, to whom this gift of the Spirit has been given. The day of Pentecost has come, and the Spirit rests on each of us and we're all included in this outpouring, to see visions, not of what is, but what could be, to dream dreams of a better world, to speak, to sing, to prophesy the goodness of God that has touched our lives, and then to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

And through it all, for Maverick and Adam and John and for all of us, for all of the seekers, for all of the skeptics, for the confident and the confused, for the doubters and the decided, for the questioning and the questing, the Holy Spirit comes, and "The Lord" is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.